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ABSTRACT

Arising out of one reading clinician's journey through the training year in Reading Recovery, this paper articulates the content of the lessons learned and explores their implications for clinical reading practice. The lessons learned that are discussed in the paper are: (1) make no excuses for the learner or for yourself; (2) expect learning and teach "doggedly"; (3) watch your language (using the prompts and cues that are consistent with the overall philosophy and goals of Reading Recovery); (4) guard your lesson time as a valuable commodity; and (5) do everything possible to connect reading and writing. The paper concludes that Reading Recovery teachers learn, just like their students, that learning to do something complex requires focused attention, clear and consistent guidelines, practice, and the support of others. (RS)

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by Edwin Buettner

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Lessons from Reading Recovery Lessons

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This article arises out of one reading clinician's journey through the training year in Reading Recovery, one punctuated by anxiety and intense self-doubt. In looking back, I regard it as a time of dying and rebirth, a letting go of some cherished beliefs and attitudes, concomitant with a discovery (or re-discovery) of other points of view. In what follows, I attempt to articulate the content of the lessons I learned and explore their implications for clinical reading practice. Its purpose is clearly not to throw stones; rather, it is to give definition to vague intimations of personal gaps and deficiencies in conceptualization and practice that were brought to the surface over the year. It was written in a leisurely frame of mind . . . "the summer after."

Lesson 1: Make no excuses for the learner or for yourself

As a reading clinician, I was called upon to complete a process commonly referred to as "diagnosis." Invariably, this involved not only an analysis of what the reader is able to do in reading but, also, an exploration of the "learning process" of the reader. The nature of the "learning process" was usually determined by the particular test battery selected.

Thus, for example, if one used the Woodcock Johnson battery, the student's learning aptitudes would be understood in terms of constructs such as "visual-auditory learning" and "processing speed." Use of the DTLA would configure the student's abilities with another model of learning. Authors such as Ysseldyke and others (see Duffey, Salvia, Tucker, & Ysseldyke, 1981) have repeatedly raised significant questions related to the validity of such instruments that purportedly measure "learning process and potential," particularly the relationships between the learning demands of various curricula and test outcomes.

During Reading Recovery training, I found it difficult to work with students without the explanatory concepts I was used to, such as short term memory, auditory blending, visual processing speed, and so on. I began to see the "bogey men" of these old constructs everywhere: I knew perfectly well why my Reading Recovery students were having difficulty, and I was most frustrated that I could not express it. I often wished that I could refer the children to a reading clinician for confirmation of my diagnostic hunches. The most support I would get from my teacher leader and colleagues in training was the reassurance that the students will learn.

The happy truth is that, in fact, the children did learn. To my astonishment, the boy to whom I had given the diagnosis of language disordered, according to clinical wisdom, was able to discover new words through procedures that I believed he would not be able to handle. The child who showed all the classic signs of dyslexia began to develop a sight vocabulary. Why were these children progressing?

My hunch is that it was the persistent demands of the Reading Recovery teaching process that called forth productive responses in the children. Furthermore, the holistic methodology served to integrate many processes and sub-processes of learning to read: the classic "remediate the weakness" remedial reading approach fragments the reading process and, contrary to one's best intentions, causes even more disequilibrium in children's learning.

I discovered the cybernetic-like power of learners to make their way through text, using whatever strategies and cues they can muster in the pursuit of the meaning of the whole text. Learners must make the adjustments that work for them. In most cases, clinicians or teachers are presumptuous to attempt to do for children (i. e., "adjust learning processes") what only they can do for themselves. Stated another way, a clinician inevitably becomes a specialist in the parts of reading; when given a chance, emergent readers become specialists in the idiosyncratic integration of mechanisms that work for *them*.

Lesson 2: Expect learning and teach doggedly

A most surprising discovery during the year was the realization that, in many respects, I had come to not expect learning by my students. Most clinical work begins with the premise that the referred child has a problem with learning. Although these referrals are made with a certain logic and good will, a deeper level of analysis reveals a flawed fundamental assumption: that failure to learn results from something within the child that is not working well. Is it any wonder that, working within this pathology model, teachers learn to be content with very modest expectations for learners?

Reading Recovery reverses the assumption of within-the-child "learning process difficulties" and the attitudinal nuances that accompany it. The program emphasizes good teaching, teaching that is persistent and which conveys to students a strong belief that they will be successful in this adventure of learning to read.

From my experience, I characterize Reading Recovery teaching as disciplined and relentless. Whenever I found myself wavering in my belief in a child's capacity to learn, I noticed an accompanying slackness in my lessons (such as leaving out certain lesson elements, being overly supportive during text reading, etc.).

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Now I see that attitudes and beliefs are at the heart of the complex dance of teacher-student interactions; that is, teachers and students continuously reinforce, support, and verify one anther, or fail to do so, often at unconscious levels. When seen from this perspective, the teacher's role must be to provide the "strong still centre" that the student is able to rely upon on a consistent basis.

Slackness in teaching inevitably brings about reciprocating responses on the part of the student. At some level, the student begins to sense a loss of confidence on the part of the teacher. Though the words may be supportive, the student easily recognizes the inconsistent non-verbal components of the message. Simply put, the student may ask himself (although not consciously in most cases), "Why is my teacher not making me do this? Maybe it's because I can't do it."

Do all students learn at the same rate? Obviously not. Pedagogical wisdom, as well as common sense, acknowledges that differences, both qualitative and quantitative, will always exist among students. This reality is woven into the very fabric of the Reading Recovery program: teachers must become experts in how a particular child learns and adjust their teaching accordingly.

Some children need many more lessons than others, and a certain (small) percentage of children or students will not make the accelerated progress required for them to be discontinued at a level commensurate with their age mates. However, because one cannot predict how successful any one student will be, particularly for an area as complex as reading, we must remain undaunted in our teaching efforts. In essence, we have no choice but to teach as if every single student will become a successful reader. Only in this way will we approximate that elusive goal of having each child "work up to potential."

Lesson 3: Watch your language

Initially, I found it very difficult to comply with the expectation that the cues and prompts from the training text were to be used in as faithful a manner as possible during the lessons. Standing under my "professional" umbrella, I felt that I was in some sense beyond the demands of what I perceived as scripts.

However, after some honest reflection, I could not but conclude that most of what I had grown accustomed to saying to the children was at the level of unexamined reflex. Perhaps more importantly, I discovered that in exercising my freedom in saying what felt right at the time, I may have been confusing the children and blocking the purpose of giving the prompts in the first place: to enable students to internalize the language of the lessons and the strategic responding it calls forth.

The Reading Recovery manual provides the teacher-in-training with a set of clear, well-thought out prompts and cues that are consistent with the overall philosophy and goals of the program. However, this structure does not mean that Reading Recovery is a scripted program. The distinction between tool and machine may be instructive to establish this distinction.

A machine is designed to produce a standard outcome, as are scripted educational programs. Tools, on the other hand, are used in the service of outcomes that are determined by their users; a tool's effectiveness is always sharply circumscribed by the skill of the person using it. The ideal machine is one that operates effectively with a minimum of human interference; a tool maximizes human involvement.

Analogously, I have come to regard the language of Reading Recovery as a set of tools. Their use does not guarantee effective teaching, any more than giving a set of dental tools to an uninitiated dentist will ensure effective dentistry. Similarly, one will not become an effective Reading Recovery teacher by simply memorizing the language.

So why exact rendering of the cues and prompts? Simply because it is, most paradoxically, liberating. When one has internalized the language of Reading Recovery to the level of automaticity, the appropriate prompt needed at a given point in time is immediately accessible to the teacher. Not only does this rapid and reflex-like retrieval save time; more importantly, it allows one to operate at the more challenging level of decision-making. Imagine putting yourself in the hands of a dentist who must give conscious attention to holding the instrument during a complex dental procedure.

As a trained Reading Recovery teacher, one has at one's disposal a wide repertoire of language that covers the full gamut of needs within a lesson. The skilled teacher uses the prompts effortlessly and in a consistent manner. From the point of view of students, such consistency is not only reassuring; it provides the scaffolding upon which they will be able to internalize the language of strategic functioning.

Children who are at risk of learning to read must often experience themselves at sea, in terms of what the task requires of

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them. Texts are variable in their language and structure, and the strategies required to make one's way through them must be flexibly applied; in other words, learning to read is not simple. The language of Reading Recovery is the solid rock that children learn to rely upon; the shifting sands of capricious cueing and prompting often do not provide sufficient security for emergent readers, particularly for those already confused about what they are to do.

Lesson 4: Guard your lesson time as a valuable commodity

In my experience, the half-hour structure of the lessons was the most difficult aspect of the training process. I am afraid that I had become used to a kind of Winnie-the- Pooh approach to my "remedial" lessons ("I don't know where I'm going but I'll know when I get there").

The expectation that I incorporate all of the lesson elements into every lesson simply seemed unrealistic to me. Why? I believe it was because over time in working with students, I had failed to maintain control of what needed to be done. For example, if the student was having a "bad day," I would eliminate an aspect of the lesson that would be frustrating for that student. Or, perhaps because I was having a bad day, my tutoring would be less demanding.

Consistently doing everything in the half-hour lesson, therefore, became yet another important exercise in discipline in order to ensure that all of the important aspects of a good reading lesson were present in an integrated way. Anything less contributes to fragmentation. In analyzing the lesson elements I tended to omit, I discovered that they were precisely those aspects I found difficult to teach and/or expected students to find hard. Teachers and students are often partners in this avoidance-of-the-difficult two-step.

Control of time is a most effective means of ensuring that the important things will be done in every lesson. Each lesson is an integrated entity in which the whole is more than the sum of the parts. If some of the parts are missing, the potential of the whole is diminished. Furthermore, the voluminous research on effective schools has consistently revealed time on task as a prime indicator of robust learning environments. Remaining highly vigilant of the time given to the various lesson elements ensures not only that time is actually spent on the task at hand (learning to read and write), but that it is apportioned in a balanced way.

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Lesson 5: Do everything possible to connect reading and writing

The relationships between learning to read and learning to write are complex. For example, some children's writing abilities seem to outstrip their reading; it is not all that unusual for emergent readers not to be able to read words they have written. In working with emergent readers and writers, often one has the impression that they regard the two tasks as unconnected. Hence, the "obvious" links between the two abilities cannot be assumed.

Reading Recovery lessons are structured in such a way as to ensure the strengthening of the bonds between the reading and writing processes. Thus, while children may be walking two separate paths as they read and write, an effective Reading Recovery lesson invites learners to walk both paths with the ultimate goal of doing so simultaneously.

The skilled teacher looks for and capitalizes on opportunities for integration of reading and writing. A word 'taken to fluency' becomes the basis for building word analogies. The child's writing becomes a reading activity after the story is cut up. The child who spells more words than he can read is asked to write a word he is having difficulty reading. These are only a few examples of how learners are given opportunities to grow in functional knowledge of how reading and writing are dynamically related.

Reflecting on my own practice over the year, I am now more aware of some things I was doing, and that I was not doing, to integrate the receptive and expressive sides of the literacy coin. I placed too much emphasis on invented spellings, possibly giving students a skewed view about the permanency of words. "Because this approach [invented spelling] ignores for the moment that real words do have fixed characteristics it can lead some children to believe that they do not" (Clay, 1991, p. 110).

Another discovery was that I tended to make low-level assumptions as to children's abilities to engage in the auditory bases for spelling work, leading me down the garden path of avoiding auditory training and attempting to teach words visually or kinesthetically.

My third insight was that I tended to give primacy to reading development, assuming that a solid basis in reading was almost sufficient for writing to "happen." I am now more convinced that reading and writing exist in a kind of mutually scaffolding relationship, and that one needs to support the other throughout the various stages of literacy development.

Summary Reflections

Over the training year, I found myself repeatedly using the word "discipline" in describing my experience of Reading Recovery. The subtitle of Clay's (1991) book, *Becoming Literate*, is *The Construction of Inner Control*. I continue to be struck by this most elegant way of describing the concept of discipline.

The concept of pedagogical discipline is born of a recognition that focused effort is required to attain competency in an area such as reading. Furthermore, any act of reading can be seen as an exercise in allowing the text to exert some control over one's perceptual and thought processes. In effective reading, one does not allow the text to "say" anything. Good readers know at a basic level that a circumscribed message exists within the text; in order to access that message, readers discipline themselves, that is, they apply inner controls related to literacy.

Emergent readers are embarking on a life-long journey of discovery, including

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the potential and limitations, of the written word. They discover that something is inherently unnatural about print yet, as with all cultural achievements, learning to deal with print gives one power. Almost all young children want to learn to read when they enter school. While the large majority are successful, some few quickly become ambivalent about the process of learning to read when they discover the effort that it requires. With the most benign of intentions, we do these children a disservice when we pretend that all aspects of learning to read are fun, or assume that we know how to design instruction that will bypass these difficult aspects.

I believe that many examples exist of delightful parallels between what Reading Recovery children are doing during their lessons and what happens to Reading Recovery teachers as they develop in their craft. My teacher leader had to deal with my particular points of resistance and avoidance. I was reminded that, ultimately, it was I who had to take control of my teaching, while trusting the wisdom of the program as well as that of my colleagues. In other words, I had to subject myself to the discipline of the Reading Recovery training process.

At its root, discipline is a concept related to freedom. The student who does not acquire appropriate control of text will simply not experience the full power of the written word, receptively or expressively. I feel that my experience last year has opened my eyes to the ease with which one can become undisciplined in assisting learners who find the process of becoming literate a trying one that challenges their sense of competency and self-esteem. Reading Recovery teachers learn, just like their students, that learning to do something complex requires focused attention, clear and consistent guidelines, practice, and the support of others. These elements come to fill the spaces left empty when the "mystique" of helping students with learning problems is exorcised.

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